

Homily in the Chapel of the Rue du Bac

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9-14; Matthew 8:23-27

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Many years ago there was the song called “The Sound of Silence.” It begins with the lines:

*Hello darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again.
Because a vision softly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains, within the sounds of silence.*

In the silence of sleep and dreams, St. Catherine Labouré experienced visions and from those visions came sounds or voices which have enriched our Vincentian Family and the Church since the mid-19th century.

Today, I would like to share with you those sounds of silence, the sounds of contemplative silence which have enriched us all.

Silence can take many forms. At its most negative it is tense where you could cut the air. At other times we have anticipatory silence as before any great performance; a respectful silence as we await a special guest; a silence which is compassionate in the home of the bereaved; an embarrassed silence when careless or angry words are spoken to another in public; the forever silence which follows the death of a loved one. Finally there is contemplative silence, that silence which produces sounds which speak of hope, of reassurance, of serenity, a silence which nurtures a prophetic voice. This is the silence we associate with holy places like Lourdes, Rue du Bac, Fain-les-Moutiers, Château l'Evêque or Dax. It is also the silence of holy people like St. Catherine Labouré.

The first sound of contemplative silence for St. Catherine Labouré was the sound of presence, a tangible, communicating presence of the Eucharistic Lord at her First Holy Communion and, later, during daily Mass, a sound which replaced the numbing sound of loneliness in the death of her mother, and the feeling of isolation as a visionary, in her community life.

The next sounds for Catherine were actual human voices, the voice of St. Vincent telling her in her dream to follow him in ministering to the poor, and the

voice of Mary, the conversational voice, the voice of reassurance for the Double Family of Vincent and for the world.

On this very day in 1830 Catherine heard the sound of Mary's voice from contemplative silence: "My child, the good God wishes to entrust you with a mission." Catherine, as we know, achieved this mission for the family of Vincent, Louise and Frederick Ozanam and for the Church. This is what we celebrate today.

William Wordsworth speaks of thoughts too deep for words. These are the thoughts which beautiful landscapes convey. He simply paints the picture and we hear the silent sounds within us. It is likewise for Catherine as she conveys to us images too deep for words, like her vision of St. Vincent's heart and her image of the medal. The heart of Vincent in its varying colours calls us by name and indeed speaks sounds which we can only hear in contemplation, the call to innocence, the call to charity and the call to accept the crosses which come our way. The image of the medal, revealed in absolute contemplative silence, once more brings us thoughts too deep for words. Yet, how many thoughts found expression in sounds of gratitude and words of praise from people like Ratisbonne, John Henry Newman, Frederick Ozanam and others whose lives were touched by the medal.

In our first reading today Elijah hears Yahweh in the sound of a gentle breeze. Fr. René Laurentin prefers to describe this as the "voice of a gentle silence." From this gentle silence Elijah heard a voice of strength to support him in his prophecy. In the third and final apparition in December 1830, Our Lady said to Catherine: "You will not see me anymore but you will hear my voice during your prayers." This was the reassuring voice of Mary heard in contemplative silence which, like Elijah, gave Catherine strength through days of difficulty with Fr. Aladel, the days of the commune and persecution — a prophetic voice which became the bridge between Good Friday and Easter Sunday in the life of the Double Family of Vincent and Louise — it was a prophetic voice strengthened finally in her vision of the triumph of the cross.

The Gospel today portrays the Church with the waves breaking over the bows of the boat. The apostles fear that they are going down. Just as the Lord was awoken from sleep and spoke words which brought reassurance to his apostles, so Catherine, in the time of political upheaval and persecution, the time when the Community in Rue de Sèvres had only 14 old men, was awoken from her sleep to encounter Mary, and from that moment spoke words of serenity in the midst of personal suffering and words of hope in the midst of persecution.

Today, we need to hear new sounds, new voices in a milieu of contemplative silence. "Too much do we ask for what we want; and not enough for what the

good Lord wants,” Catherine once said to a companion. Today we have an opportunity to listen to the many voices of Catherine, voices of serenity when community life is trying, voices of presence in prayer, and voices of hope and reassurance in the midst of dwindling numbers. In our gathering our prayer will be that we might hear these voices in the places and spaces which, for Catherine, were places and spaces of contemplative silence.

For St. Vincent every resolution was to be single, precise, definite and possible. He would say of Louise that, whenever she found herself alone, she was in contemplative prayer. Vincent might simply be asking us to take such a resolution — be people of contemplative silence every time we are alone.

In this Chapel of the Apparitions may we be sustained and strengthened by the sounds which become contemplative silence.